

# South American digital diplomacy: approaches before and after the Russian-Ukrainian crisis

## Diplomacia digital sudamericana: enfoques antes y después de la crisis ruso-ucraniana

*Diplomacia digital sul-americana: abordagens antes e depois da crise russo-ucraniana*

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**ABSTRACT** | In the digital age, diplomacy integrates traditional methods with modern tools such as social media. E-diplomacy enhances global dialogue, but struggles with misinformation and requires strategic communication. This study examined the Twitter reactions of 11 South American presidents to the Russo-Ukrainian war, specifically to Russia's aggression on 24 February 2022. Tweets from February to April 2022 were analysed using Fanpage Karma and RStudio. Engagement metrics and sentiment were assessed across three phases. The results show South America's different diplomatic approaches to the conflict. Venezuela's Maduro supported Russia, in contrast to Western views, while Argentina's Fernández emphasised diverse relations and advocated post-invasion peace. Leaders such as Lasso and da Silva had limited tweets, suggesting neutrality or a local focus. Others, including Ali and Benítez, remained silent. Castillo's tweets focused largely on Ukraine. Chile advocated international law, Brazil leaned towards neutrality, and Peru emphasised its citizens. Maduro criticised Western sanctions and the media. The Ukraine issue highlights South America's nuanced digital diplomacy, reflecting different responses to Russia's actions.

**KEYWORDS:** digital diplomacy; Russo-Ukrainian War; South American presidents; Twitter reactions; e-diplomacy.

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**RESUMEN** | *En la era digital, la diplomacia fusiona métodos tradicionales con herramientas como las redes sociales. La diplomacia electrónica promueve el diálogo global, pero la desinformación es un obstáculo. Este estudio evaluó las reacciones en Twitter de 11 líderes sudamericanos ante la agresión rusa a Ucrania en 2022. Utilizando Fanpagekarma y RStudio, se analizaron los tuits de febrero a abril de 2022 para determinar el sentimiento y la participación. Las respuestas variaron: Maduro apoyó a Rusia, Fernández abogó por la paz, Lasso y da Silva parecían neutrales, Alí y Benítez guardaron silencio, Castillo se centró en Ucrania, Chile defendió el derecho internacional, Brasil se mostró neutral, y Perú salvaguardó a su pueblo. La diplomacia en línea de América del Sur refleja diversas respuestas a las acciones de Rusia.*

**PALABAS CLAVE:** *diplomacia digital; guerra ruso-ucraniana; presidentes sudamericanos; reacciones en Twitter; diplomacia electrónica.*

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**RESUMO** | *Na era digital, a diplomacia fusiona métodos tradicionais com ferramentas como as redes sociais. A diplomacia eletrônica promove o diálogo global, mas a desinformação é um obstáculo. Este estudo avaliou as reações no Twitter de 11 líderes sul-americanos à agressão russa à Ucrânia em 2022. Usando Fanpagekarma e RStudio, os tweets de fevereiro a abril de 2022 foram analisados quanto ao sentimento e engajamento. Os resultados mostram diferentes abordagens diplomáticas. Maduro, da Venezuela, apoiou a Rússia; Fernández, da Argentina, defendeu a paz; os líderes Lasso e da Silva pareciam neutros. Ali e Benítez permaneceram em silêncio; Castillo se concentrou na Ucrânia. O Chile defendeu o direito internacional, o Brasil manteve-se neutro, enquanto o Peru salvaguardava o seu povo. A diplomacia online da América do Sul reflete diversas respostas às ações da Rússia.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *diplomacia digital; guerra russo-ucraniana; presidentes sul-americanos; reações no Twitter; diplomacia eletrônica.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving digital age, diplomacy stands out among the fields that are experiencing significant changes in their traditional norms and values. Throughout history, diplomacy has been the art and practice of negotiation between state representatives, enabling nations to form alliances, resolve conflicts and express global interests and concerns. Communication is at the heart of diplomacy, which has been increasingly amplified and diversified in the modern era through the use of digital tools (Rashica, 2018).

Digital diplomacy, also known as e-diplomacy, combines traditional diplomatic practices with the transformative power of digital technologies, including social media platforms. Essentially, e-diplomacy involves the use of the Internet and related technologies to achieve diplomatic goals, such as establishing virtual embassies, offering online consular services, managing crises, conducting public outreach, promoting national identity, and disseminating information (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

The proliferation of social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram, has significantly expanded the range of tools available for e-diplomacy. Known for their wide reach, interactivity, and user-centric content, these platforms have blurred the lines between institutions and individuals. This democratisation of diplomacy has enabled more comprehensive and participatory interactions (Duncombe, 2018; Tasente, 2019).

The combination of traditional and digital diplomacy has led to significant changes in the way world leaders and public institutions communicate. In today's era of digital advancements and increased connectivity, global interactions are experiencing significant shifts. As nations face intricate challenges on the global stage, it's crucial to understand the nuances of digital diplomacy (Aivaz et al., 2022; Du et al., 2023; Micu et al., 2021).

Digital diplomacy goes beyond crisis response, as research highlights its value in broadening outreach, fostering innovation and developing institutional capacity. European organisations have effectively used social networks to engage more effectively with digital communities (Rus et al., 2021). This was evident during the Russo-Ukrainian crisis in 2022-2023, providing an example for examining the complexities of digital diplomacy. South American countries have been particularly influential in shaping global dialogue, using online platforms, especially Twitter, to express their views and advocate for international solutions. These platforms have been instrumental in spreading messages of unity, peace and solidarity, facilitating interactive communication and illustrating the participatory nature of digital diplomacy (Tasente, 2023a, 2023b; Tasente et al., 2023).

While e-diplomacy offers significant advantages, its full potential is not universally embraced. Despite recognising the diplomatic impact of social media, major South Asian states, are hesitant in engaging foreign audiences (Ittefaq, 2019). Digital diplomacy goes beyond communication, influencing information management, public diplomacy, strategy, and crisis management, requiring nations to continually adapt their diplomatic approaches (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). In South America and internationally, the impact of social media on public opinion and diplomacy is evident. These platforms are redefining public diplomacy, linking emotions, identity, and diplomacy, with emotional connections through digital channels significantly impacting diplomatic relations (Duncombe, 2019).

Thus, the impact of digital diplomacy on regional narratives, as seen in South America, is a pertinent topic for analysis and understanding in times of crisis, such as the Russia-Ukraine situation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital diplomacy, at the intersection of technology and international relations, is emerging as a central force in contemporary global communication, particularly accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical events such as the Russia-Ukraine crisis. This evolution has been significantly shaped by the integration of social media. Platforms such as Twitter play a central role in how governments and diplomatic entities engage with the public and articulate policy (Danziger & Schreiber, 2021; Khan et al., 2021).

Aguirre-Azócar and Erlandsen (2018) discuss the challenges and opportunities of digital public diplomacy in Latin America, noting a shift from traditional diplomatic methods to more transparent and inclusive digital tools that encourage citizen participation and diverse debate. This transition highlights the importance of digital infrastructure and civil society engagement in contemporary diplomatic efforts.

Furthermore, Manfredi-Sánchez and colleagues (2021) found that during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, presidents from Spain, Argentina, Mexico and Brazil used Twitter to disseminate populist messages that resonated with their personal political styles. Their study categorised tweets into themes such as polarisation and leadership glorification.

As political leaders in South America moved to strategic use of Twitter during the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, we observed the platform's role in public diplomacy. Leaders have adopted different communication styles that reflect their political identities - whether as institutional figures or individual politicians. This

differentiation is essential for understanding the dynamics of publication, response times and the tone of the messages exchanged.

Juan-Luis Manfredi-Sánchez (2022) examines the concept of public diplomacy in Latin America and its distinct regional approach, concluding that despite sharing common principles with global models, such as soft power, Latin American diplomacy is fragmented along conservative and Chavista lines and lacks a unified strategy. This fragmentation is exacerbated by the region's presidentialism, which has a significant impact on the development of international communication. In the Ecuadorian context, the Foreign minister's use of Twitter is an example of how digital diplomacy has expanded into the realm of social media. This phenomenon, dubbed *twitterdiplomacy* by Elortegui Gómez and Miles Valdivia (2018), goes beyond traditional diplomatic communication and positions the minister as an important mediator in the versatile and ever-changing digital realm. In contrast, Twitter's influence on the dissemination of messages in the Brazilian network is significantly limited, with posts rarely shared and receiving minimal likes. Furthermore, the platform's predominant use in Portuguese limits its reach in the Lusophone world (Peron & Pereira da Silva, 2018).

Similarly, the nature of President Trump's Twitter communication has been analysed by Pain and Masullo Chen (2019), who portray him as a political outsider through the lens of deliberative democracy and technological populism. The research suggests that the effectiveness of Twitter communication may depend on whether the account is personal or institutional. Meanwhile, Recuero and colleagues (2020) revealed Twitter's role in the dissemination of partisan disinformation during the 2018 Brazilian elections. However, Mboya (2021) highlighted how digital diplomacy aided Kenya's pandemic response, while Rufai and Bunce (2020) highlighted Twitter's importance in disseminating accurate public health information from G7 leaders.

Expanding on the theme of crisis communication, research by Romero Vara and colleagues (2021) suggests a move towards more dialogic communication by Foreign Affairs Ministries in the Americas during crises. These findings suggest that the nature of the Twitter account –whether personal or official– can significantly influence the communication approach and audience perception. Similarly, Sytnik and colleagues (2022) found that local digital media had a greater impact than UK diplomatic channels during the Venezuelan crisis, challenging preconceived notions of influence.

Furthering the conversation on the distinct nature of digital diplomacy, Mazumdar (2021) defines it as distinct from traditional forms, with unique engagement strategies emerging on social media. Ingenhoff and colleagues (2021)

examine how opinion leaders on Twitter can eclipse official narratives, highlighting the decentralisation of narrative control.

In light of these shifts, Tran (2023) and Adler-Nissen and Eggeling (2022) emphasise the need for blended diplomacy that navigates the nuances of digital and traditional methods. Similarly, Bjola and Manor (2022) predict a post-pandemic landscape in which such a mix becomes the norm.

Finally, Pham (2023) provides an insightful analysis of Ukraine's digital strategy following the Russian invasion in 2022, illustrating how digital platforms and personalised messaging have been used to shape national identity and international perceptions. It highlights the central role of the nature of the account in strategic communication during conflict.

Collectively, the literature underscores the transformative impact of social media, particularly Twitter, on digital diplomacy. It highlights the need for diplomatic agencies to adopt interactive and citizen-centric communication tactics in response to crises and geopolitical tensions. The burgeoning field of digital diplomacy requires an understanding of the varying effectiveness of personal and institutional accounts, the integration of official sources, and the nuances of regional and global communication strategies.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

General objective: to analyse the Twitter reactions of the presidents of 11 South American countries to the Russo-Ukrainian war, before and after the invasion of Ukraine by the armed forces of the Russian Federation on 24 February 2022, using a critical approach.

Specific objectives:

- To quantify the number of Twitter posts by each president discussing the Russo-Ukrainian war.
- To compare engagement metrics on Twitter posts about the Russo-Ukrainian war with other topics.
- To conduct a qualitative assessment of the presidents' public (diplomatic) stance in three different periods: before the invasion, immediately after the invasion, and the subsequent post-invasion stance.

Data collection: data was aggregated from Twitter, capturing posts between 1 February 2022 and 1 April 2022. This was specifically chosen to capture both pre-invasion and post-invasion sentiment. The reactions of the presidents of Argentina

(Alberto Fernández), Brazil (Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva), Chile (Gabriel Boric Font), Colombia (Gustavo Petro), Ecuador (William Lasso), Guyana (Mohamed Irfaan Ali), Paraguay (Marito Abdo Benítez), Peru (Pedro Castillo), Suriname (Chan Santokhi), Uruguay (Luis Lacalle Pou) and Venezuela (Nicolás Maduro) were collected. The data was collected using the Fanpagekarma.com platform, which specialises in monitoring, analysing and benchmarking social media content across different platforms.

### Data analysis

*Filtering relevant data:* after the initial collection, the data underwent a preliminary filtering process using RStudio. To identify tweets relevant to the Russian-Ukrainian war, we conducted a search based on specific keywords. We searched tweets for words such as Ukraine, Russia, Putin and Zelenski that were related to the war. This approach allowed us to identify tweets that directly or indirectly referred to the geopolitical event and the key figures associated with it. As a result, we curated a subset of the data, narrowing down the dataset to only those tweets that were of primary interest for the study.

*Quantifying relevant Twitter posts:* after filtering, the study aimed to quantify the extent to which the Russian-Ukrainian war influenced the Twitter conversations of these presidents. The data was grouped by each leader to allow for comparative analysis, providing insights into which presidents interacted more frequently on the topic. This may indicate the importance or interest of the event within their respective administrations or countries.

*Comparative engagement analysis:* in addition to the frequency of tweets, the study also looked at the impact and engagement of each tweet. Understanding the response of their respective audiences is crucial to understanding not only what the presidents were communicating, but also how it was received. To achieve this, a number of engagement metrics have been developed:

- a) *Average engagement:* the mean number of reactions (likes, retweets, comments) a tweet received. This provided a general overview of how tweets were being received on average.
- b) *Median engagement:* a more robust measure against outliers, the median provided insight into the central tendency of engagement.
- c) *Engagement extremes:* by identifying the tweets with the minimum and maximum responses, the research was able to identify the range and the most and least influential tweets on the topic. Through this comparative engagement analysis, the study was able to determine the general sentiment,



interest or apathy towards the topic and how it differed from other topics the presidents tweeted about.

### Qualitative analysis

While quantitative metrics provide a tangible measure of engagement, understanding the nuances, tone, and underlying messages of the tweets required an in-depth qualitative approach. This involved a manual review of tweets related to the Russian-Ukrainian war. The qualitative analysis aimed to classify the tweets into three distinct temporal categories:

- a) Pre-invasion sentiments: this examined the diplomatic stance and sentiments expressed prior to the invasion on 24 February 2022.
- b) Immediate reactions: this category captured the initial reactions immediately following the invasion, providing insights into the immediate emotional and diplomatic reactions of the presidents.
- c) Post-invasion positions: this assessed longer-term attitudes, weeks after the invasion. The aim was to determine whether there was a shift or consistency in public position from the immediate aftermath to the more reflective post-event period.

## RESULTS

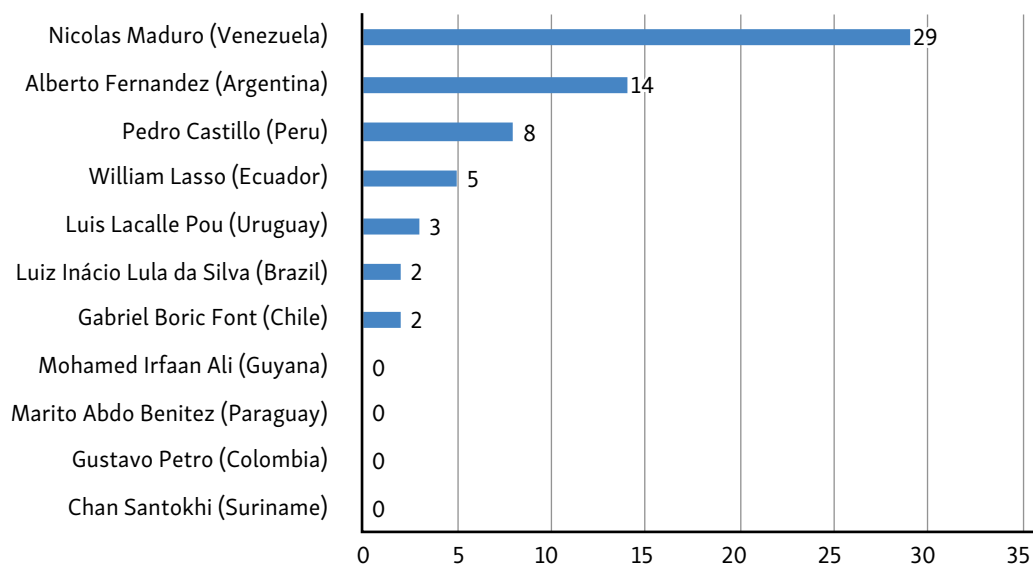
### Number of Twitter posts discussing the Russo-Ukrainian War

The advent of digital platforms, particularly social media like Twitter, has revolutionised communication in international relations and diplomacy. Leaders use Twitter, with its concise 280-character limit, to effectively communicate policies and perspectives on global issues, making it a vital tool for disseminating impactful messages worldwide. The responses of South American leaders to the Ukrainian conflict between 1 February and 1 April, 2022 (figure 1) provide a window into this digital diplomacy. Despite geographical distance, South America was actively engaged in the discussion, with its leaders offering diverse online perspectives on the crisis, marked by high geopolitical tensions and human suffering.

Nicolás Maduro, the President of Venezuela, was active in communicating his perspective on the Ukrainian issue. He made 29 posts on the subject, accounting for 4.12% of his total communications during the period. Maduro's stance on the crisis was firm and contrasted with Western views. His posts sought to present Venezuela's perspective on the issue, possibly to challenge the dominant Western narrative.

Alberto Fernández of Argentina posted fewer times than Maduro, with 14 posts representing only 3.97% of his total communication. Argentina has a history of balancing its regional leadership in Latin America with a broader global perspective.





**Figure 1. Number of Twitter posts talking about the Russian-Ukraine War**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

Fernández's posts on the Ukrainian issue can be seen as evidence of this historical balance, as he engages with a major global event while considering its potential implications for Argentina and the region.

Peru's Pedro Castillo's response is interesting, as he posted about the issue eight times (1.11% of his total tweets). Traditionally, Peru has focused on regional issues and maintained a non-aligned stance on global affairs. Pedro Castillo's posts suggest a shift, recognising the importance of the Ukraine crisis and its potential impact on global dynamics.

Some South American leaders were less engaged with the Ukrainian situation on the digital platform. William Lasso from Ecuador, Gabriel Boric Font from Chile and Luiza Inacio Lula da Silva from Brazil had low engagement rates. Lula da Silva's limited contributions are particularly unexpected given Brazil's important position in the region. The reticence of these leaders could be influenced by a number of internal and external strategic factors.

Interestingly, leaders such as Mohamed Irfaan Ali (Guyana), Marito Abdo Benítez (Paraguay), Gustavo Petro (Colombia) and Chan Satokhi (Suriname) did not comment at all on Twitter. It is unclear why they remained silent, although possible reasons could include strategic decisions to remain neutral, a focus on domestic issues, or a lack of strong historical or economic ties to the issue that prompted public statements.

The methods used by South American leaders to engage with the Ukrainian crisis on Twitter provide an insight into contemporary diplomacy. While numbers and percentages provide an overview, they do not convey the underlying geopolitical

strategies, historical relationships and diplomatic considerations implicit in each post (or lack thereof).

As the globe becomes more complex and the world continues to evolve, social media platforms such as Twitter will play a crucial role in international relations. Digital diplomacy is more than just posting frequently or having the highest number of followers. Rather, it is about understanding the digital realm as a new arena for traditional diplomatic manoeuvring, deliberation and communication. The different responses of South American leaders to the Ukraine crisis illustrate this dynamic environment and the complex facets of contemporary statecraft.

### **Comparing Twitter engagement: Ukraine war topics vs. others**

The digital footprint of South American leaders provides fascinating insights (table 1) into their engagement with the global socio-political landscape, particularly the Ukrainian conflict. By examining the data at hand, it is possible to discern clear patterns that reveal how geopolitics and digital diplomacy are intertwined.

Alberto Fernández from Argentina provides an interesting case study. His Twitter engagement data shows that posts related to the Ukraine conflict received significantly more attention, with an average of 1,969.78 reactions, compared to 788.82 reactions for non-conflict-related posts. This marked difference highlights the heightened interest his audience has in global crises. However, the 22,297 responses to a non-Ukraine post suggest that other issues are of greater interest to his audience.

Chan Santokhi from Suriname, on the other hand, illustrates the variation in digital diplomacy, but on a smaller scale. His non-Ukrainian posts average only 8.6 replies. The lack of Ukraine-focused tweets may indicate limited engagement with the issue or a strategic prioritisation of regional concerns.

Pedro Castillo from Peru shows a distinct pattern, with his Ukraine-related posts receiving less attention, averaging 30.63 replies compared to 121.21 replies for his non-Ukraine content. This may indicate that Pedro Castillo's audience prioritises local or other global issues over the Ukrainian conflict.

Gabriel Boric Font's engagement in Chile presents a dramatic picture. His tweets about Ukraine receive an average of 59,330 replies, significantly more than the 4,017.97 replies for his other posts. This contrast underlines the importance of the Ukrainian situation for his digital community.

Gustavo Petro from Colombia has a high level of engagement on his digital platform. Even without data from Ukraine for comparison, the average of 4,522.33 reactions to his general posts indicates a strong interest in his perspectives among his followers. Avoiding subjective evaluations, this objective statement is clear and concise.

Page	Russo-Ukrainian Wars Posts	Mean_INT	Median_INT	Min_INT	Max_INT
Alberto Fernández (Argentina)	No	789	0	0	22,297
	Yes	1,970	1,250	0	9,511
Chan Santokhi (Suriname)	No	9	8	3	19
Pedro Castillo (Peru)	No	121	63	0	2,986
	Yes	31	0	0	89
Gabriel Boric Font (Chile)	No	4,018	0	0	120,328
	Yes	59,330	59,330	24,988	93,672
Gustavo Petro (Colombia)	No	4,522	2,261	0	14,219
Luis Lacalle Pou (Uruguay)	No	1,185	899	0	13,124
	Yes	8,806	0	0	26,417
Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Brazil)	No	11,313	7,368	0	240,511
	Yes	13,133	13,133	4166	22,100
Marito Abdo Benítez (Paraguay)	No	358	0	0	7,292
Mohamed Irfaan Ali (Guyana)	No	0	0	0	0
Nicolás Maduro (Venezuela)	No	2,051	2,430	0	9,580
	Yes	1,961	0	0	10,529
William Lasso (Ecuador)	No	490	3	0	8,939
	Yes	3,305	2,545	0	10,581

**Table 1. Comparative analysis of Twitter responses: Russia-Ukraine conflict vs. other subjects**

*Source: Own elaboration.*

In Uruguay, Luis Lacalle Pou's digital interactions show a significant divergence. The average of 8,805.67 reactions to his Ukraine-focused content, compared to 1,185.41 for other posts, indicates the strong resonance of the topic. However, the highest engagement for a non-Ukraine post, with 13,124 reactions, also highlights the wide range of topics of interest to his audience.

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the President of Brazil, has a significant following and receives high engagement across a range of topics. While posts on the Ukraine received an average of 13,133 reactions, other posts were not far behind with 11,313.29 reactions, indicating an audience that is well informed and interested in a wide range of topics.

For Marito Abdo Benítez from Paraguay, the average number of reactions to non-Ukrainian content is 358.41. In the absence of Ukraine-centric data, it is not possible to make a direct comparison. However, it does provide an insight into the type of content that captivates his audience.

It is notable that Mohamed Irfaan Ali from Guyana shows no digital engagement, suggesting limited online activity or possibly strategic silence on certain issues.

Nicolás Maduro (Venezuela), a prominent figure in global affairs, receives a balanced response across the board. The averages of 2,050.85 for general posts and 1,961.14 for Ukraine-related content indicate a digital community that values his perspectives on both local and global affairs.

William Lasso from Ecuador, on the other hand, experiences a clear discrepancy in responses based on content. With an average of 3,305 replies for Ukraine-related tweets compared to 490.33 for others, it is clear that global political issues, particularly the Ukrainian conflict, are of great importance to his online following.

In conclusion, this comparative analysis shows the different ways in which South American leaders engage with their digital followers and how they are perceived. It highlights the role of global events, such as the Ukrainian conflict, in shaping digital diplomacy and highlights the different tactics adopted by leaders in navigating this new reality.

### **Qualitative analysis of Twitter posts: the public stance of South American presidents before and after the Russian invasion in Ukraine**

The comparison of tweets before and after the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation provides valuable insights into the public communication stance of South American presidents on the evolving geopolitical situation in Ukraine. The analysis of these statements sheds light on the foreign policy approach of South American countries.

#### *Alberto Fernández (Argentina)*

*Pre-invasion stance:* Before 24 February, 2022, Argentine President Fernández emphasized multilateralism, moving beyond the communism-capitalism divide, as evident in his tweets advocating respectful engagement with all countries and acknowledging a multilateral world (Fernández, 2022a). He aimed to expand Argentina's economic connections, particularly with Russia and China, seeking to position Argentina as a key investment hub in Latin America and describing the Argentina-Russia relationship as a "comprehensive strategic partnership" (Fernández, 2022b), reflecting a balanced approach towards both Western powers and nations like Russia and China.

*Post-invasion stance:* After the invasion, President Fernández's (2022c, 2022d) stance shifted significantly, condemning military force and urging Russia to halt its actions and return to dialogue. His messages, "We call on all parties not to use military force" and "I deeply regret the war escalation", reflect his disapproval of the situation in Ukraine. Despite earlier emphasizing economic and strategic commitments, Fernández openly expressed concerns about the invasion, advocating for dialogue, respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and human rights. His later tweets in March, especially during the videoconference with European Council President Charles Michel, reaffirmed Argentina's multilateral approach. In discussions about Argentina-EU relations, he remained focused on Ukraine, underscoring Argentina's dedication to dialogue and the multilateral system.

#### *Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Brazil)*

*Initial reaction:* On 24 February, Lula da Silva's tweet, though not directly addressing the invasion, subtly criticized leadership styles. He emphasized the need for true leadership fostering dialogue and cooperation, both in Brazil and globally (Da Silva, 2022a). This indirect critique argued that peace stems not from symbolic acts but from earnest diplomatic efforts. Post-invasion, Lula da Silva's tweets reflect his keen understanding of global geopolitics. While upholding Brazil's neutrality, he expressed concerns about the conflict's broader impact, urging world powers to avoid escalating tensions. His statements balance Brazil's non-aligned position with a strong advocacy for multilateral dialogue and peace, marking a swift reaction to the evolving global situation, emphasized by the absence of pre-invasion tweets.

*Post-invasion stance:* In his 3 March 2022 tweet, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva articulated Brazil's position on the invasion's geopolitical impact. His statement, "The great powers must understand that we don't want to be anyone's enemy" (Da Silva, 2022b), succinctly conveyed Brazil's desire for neutrality and impartiality in global affairs, highlighting its aversion to being entangled in major power conflicts. Lula da Silva emphasized Brazil's commitment to an independent diplomatic path, free from external pressures. Additionally, his caution against a new Cold War scenario involving the United States, China, or Russia showcased his understanding of the Ukraine crisis's potential global repercussions. He underscored the risks of the conflict escalating to a level threatening worldwide stability, with a reminder of the dire outcomes of nuclear warfare and the intricate interconnectedness of the contemporary global order.

#### *Gabriel Boric Font (Chile)*

*Initial reaction:* In his tweet on 24 February, Boric (2022a) explicitly condemned Russia's actions, using terms like "invasion" and "violation of its sovereignty" to

express his disapproval of Russia's tactics. He emphasized the "illegitimate use of force", signifying a commitment to international law and state sovereignty, while also taking a moral stance against using military aggression for diplomatic resolutions. This reflects an adherence to international norms viewed as vital by many modern states. Furthermore, his expression of solidarity with the victims showcased a humanitarian concern, bringing attention to the impact of geopolitical conflicts on ordinary people.

*Post-invasion stance:* On 27 February, Boric intensified his rhetoric, specifically condemning Putin's "unacceptable war of aggression" (Boric, 2022b). This targeted criticism towards Putin, rather than Russia as a whole, signals Chile's disagreement with its leadership's actions, not its people. Boric's endorsement of President Zelensky's speech reflects a respect for leaders opposing aggression and promotes Ukraine's voice within a globally supportive community. His statement of solidarity, "from South America go our embrace and solidarity to the Ukrainian people" (Boric, 2022b), signifies Chile's empathy and a broader South American stance against unjust aggression. This approach marks a definitive Chilean foreign policy direction rooted in international law, sovereignty, and peace, representing a clear move from neutrality to a strong position on global issues.

#### *William Lasso (Ecuador)*

*Initial reaction:* Lasso's 24 February tweet set Ecuador's position on the invasion, with a clear condemnation of Russia's "military operation" and the "violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity" (Lasso, 2022a). This places Ecuador alongside nations upholding international law and the United Nations Charter, emphasizing national sovereignty and non-aggression. By referencing the UN Charter, Lasso aligns Ecuador with global standards and peaceful dispute resolution. Concurrently, he focuses on the humanitarian aspect, stressing the impact on civilians and underscoring Ecuador's adherence to international humanitarian law. Additionally, by mentioning the over 700 Ecuadorians in Ukraine, Lasso adds a national perspective to the international crisis, highlighting Ecuador's domestic responsibilities.

*Post-invasion stance:* On 28 February, Lasso's tweet illustrated Ecuador's active response to its citizens' situation in Ukraine, demonstrating empathetic leadership by acknowledging their stories and supporting repatriation (Lasso, 2022b). The 4 March retweet about the arrival of a humanitarian flight with Ecuadorians from Ukraine highlighted the successful execution of this commitment (Cancillería del Ecuador, 2022). This action underlined the government's dedication and efficacy in protecting its citizens abroad. By 15 March, Lasso's focus shifted to the conflict's long-term economic effects, particularly on 'small producers affected by the war in Ukraine'. His commitment to finding alternative markets, especially in China,



for Ecuadorian goods (Lasso, 2022c) showed a proactive strategy to mitigate the global conflict's local economic repercussions.

#### *Pedro Castillo (Peru)*

*Initial reaction:* Pedro Castillo's initial response to the Ukraine situation was conveyed through retweets from Peru's official Foreign Ministry account, @CancilleriaPeru (2022), on 24 February. These posts expressed Peru's deep concern about the events in Ukraine and a strong rejection of the use of force. This stance aligns with a wider international perspective that prioritizes sovereign integrity preservation and mirrors Peru's foreign policy tradition, which emphasizes diplomatic resolution and peace.

*Post-invasion stance:* After his initial response, Castillo's tweets mainly focused on the safety of Peruvian citizens in Ukraine, committing to their evacuation on 25 February (Terrones, 2022). His actions, including personally welcoming repatriated citizens on March 6, underscored the human aspect of Peru's crisis response. Castillo's 9 March tweet thanking Mexico for assisting a Peruvian citizen highlights regional cooperation. The consistent alignment of his tweets with official channels like @CancilleriaPeru (2022) ensured a unified national stance, reflecting a dual focus on the geopolitical implications of the conflict and the safety of Peruvians abroad.

#### *Luis Lacalle Pou (Uruguay)*

*Initial response:* Uruguay's response to the Ukraine crisis began with a retweet from its Foreign Ministry on 23 February, highlighting the escalating tensions (Cancillería Uruguay, 2022a). This was followed by a direct statement from Lacalle Pou (2022) acknowledging Russia's offensive against Ukraine and affirming Uruguay's commitment to peace and rejection of actions violating international law and UN principles. This set the foundation for Uruguay's official stance on the conflict.

*Post-invasion stance:* In a progression from the initial reactions, President Lacalle Pou retweeted on 26 February, sharing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' post (Cancillería Uruguay, 2022b) that explicitly condemns Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This condemnation not only clarified Uruguay's position but also aligned it with the broader global narrative, especially views from international organizations like the OAS. This move reaffirmed Uruguay's dedication to multilateralism and international cooperation.

#### *Nicolás Maduro (Venezuela)*

*Pre-invasion stance:* In the days before Russia's military action in Ukraine, President Maduro's communications highlighted Venezuela's close relationship



with Russia. His tweets on 17-18 February emphasized mutual support and strategic alliances, underlining a long-standing bond between the two nations. Maduro's reference to "walking together towards development" and describing Russia as a "sister nation" (Maduro, 2022a; Maduro, 2022b) conveyed a sense of mutual admiration and cooperation.

*Initial response:* As the Ukraine conflict intensified, Maduro's tweets shifted to align more closely with the Russian perspective. On 23 February, Maduro (2022c) denounced "perverse plans to encircle Russia militarily and strategically", expressing opposition to Western alliances like NATO and portrays Russia's narrative of being a victim. Following the invasion on February 25, Maduro (2022d) called for dialogue and non-interference, emphasizing NATO's supposed breach of the Minsk agreements, thus aligning with Russia's stance and shifting blame to Western entities. His reference to the 'Minsk agreements' underscored their significance in the context of Ukraine's ongoing conflicts and international diplomacy.

*Post-invasion stance:* On March 3, 2022, as global sanctions on Russia began, Maduro tweeted against these measures and criticized what he perceived as a "diligent media campaign against the Russian people" (Maduro, 2022e). This stance suggests he views the sanctions as targeting not just the Russian government but the Russian populace as a whole, framing it as global powers uniting against Russia. Maduro's retweets from sources like @planwac, @Mision\_Verdad, and @teleSURtv, often supporting Russia's viewpoint or critiquing Western media, further emphasize his belief in a media bias against Russia and underscore his consistent alignment with Russia's position.

## CONCLUSIONS

By synthesising the impact of the Russo-Ukrainian war on digital diplomacy, this research reveals the nuanced and original digital interactions of South American leaders, serving as a barometer of the evolving paradigm of international relations in the digital age. The war not only highlights the interconnectedness of global politics, but also prompts a reassessment of digital engagement as a fundamental component of statecraft.

The development of Venezuela's digital diplomacy under Nicolás Maduro represents a departure from traditional diplomatic practices (Salinas Cañas, 2018). Maduro's online tactics have shifted towards a form of digital propaganda, especially evident on social media platforms such as Twitter, which closely aligns with Russian narratives. Argentina's Alberto Fernández, through a sophisticated digital strategy, highlights the potential of social media as a balancing tool in

foreign policy, allowing nations to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes while advocating for dialogue and peace.

The spectrum of Twitter engagement by leaders such as William Lasso, Gabriel Boric Font and Luiza Inacio Lula da Silva reflects an innovative form of digital non-alignment, where silence or selective communication on social platforms emerges as a strategic diplomatic posture. This represents a departure from passive neutrality and introduces a concept of digital abstentionism, where the choice of non-engagement is as significant as active participation.

The quantitative data from Twitter interactions give rise to an original concept: digital resonance, where the degree of engagement with a leader's tweets serves as an indirect measure of public diplomacy effectiveness. In this light, Pedro Castillo's higher engagement with non-Ukraine-related content suggests an unexplored area of digital diplomacy - domestic prioritisation in digital discourse, which can strengthen internal solidarity during global crises.

Qualitatively, the digital narratives of South American leaders contribute to theoretical construction at the intersection of communication, digital transformation and leadership. For example, Chile's Gabriel Boric Font's digital rhetoric embodies the principle of digital sovereignty, a new notion that affirms state sovereignty through a digital stance against external aggression. Brazil's Lula da Silva introduces digital non-alignment, a reimagined Cold War concept adapted for the Internet age, suggesting a middle ground in digital global narratives.

Peru's Pedro Castillo's emphasis on his citizens in the digital realm proposes people-centred digital diplomacy, a new perspective that foregrounds human impact over political rhetoric. At the same time, Venezuela's Maduro's opposition to sanctions and criticism of media bias against Russia through digital channels introduces digital counter-narratives, an approach that uses social media to challenge dominant geopolitical discourses.

In conclusion, this study not only highlights diverse responses to a global crisis, but also pioneers new theoretical insights into digital diplomacy. It posits a transformative framework in which digital engagement becomes a reflective surface for national policies, a platform for innovative diplomatic strategies, and a crucible for emerging concepts such as digital solidarity, digital abstentionism, digital resonance, digital sovereignty, digital non-alignment, and human-centred digital diplomacy. The digital responses of South American leaders to the Russo-Ukrainian war thus serve as a testament to the rich, complex and original landscape of contemporary diplomatic interactions, marking a distinct shift in the theory and practice of international relations. Seamlessly aligned with this

perspective is Aguirre's (2020) observation that the digital age has brought about a transformation of public diplomacy in Latin America, where the effectiveness of public diplomacy tactics is constantly shaped by the dynamic digital environment.

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